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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the programs and services offered by the St. Louis Child Care Services to meet the needs of preschool and school-age children with special problems (physical, mental and behavioral). A short description of the programs and the services which were carried out between 1971-1979, along with the description of the enrollment process are provided. These programs and services include the children's center, child care home, project welcome, kindergarten programs, summer programs, after-school and evening shift care, family support services, nutrition programs, and health services. (Author/MP)

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St. Louis Child Care Services, Biddeford, Maine:

A Multi-Faceted Program

Betty Van Wyck

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Biddeford, Maine, 1971-79

In November, 1971, St. Louis Child Care Services began its operations by opening the Children's Center in Biddeford, Maine. Sponsored by the Diocesan Human Relations Services, Inc., the Children's Center continued the tradition of child care begun at the turn of the century by the St. Louis Home in Scarborough.

A former school, St. Joseph's, was used for the initial facility of the Children's Center. Renovations to the first floor of the building provided comfortable space for forty preschool children.

School-age child care began during the first year and has grown as an integral part of the multi-faceted program we offer. At first we had staff members' children who came to be with their parents when not in school. Very soon we enrolled several school-age children with special problems, children for whom there seemed to be no other program. Eight years later we have a preschool child care program which includes eight school-age children who have handicaps, a morning kindergarten with afternoon child care, three day care homes which enroll some after-school children, a summer program for school children up to nine years of age, and evening shift child care for three to eight year olds.

Throughout the program's history, the services we provide have been based on the following ideals: 1) children benefit from a high quality environment provided by a variety of caring adults from their own community groups, and supported by professional staff; 2) children learn self control by having freedom within a few firm limits, by making choices, taking care of materials, managing daily routines, and by associating with adults who use reasonable self control; 3) children can feel secure within an extended family of adults and children, where they make close attachments to certain adults and children of their own choice and become friendly with a variety of capable and caring people; 4) children need to learn to take care of themselves as much as possible, to become responsible and caring toward others, and to have sufficient strength, personal ease, and humor to survive stress and to enjoy themselves and others; 5) children and staff from a variety of backgrounds, including different religions, races, economic levels and handicapping conditions, are welcome in our programs.

This paper will provide an overview of the programs and services offered by the St. Louis Child Care Services and will describe how we came to enroll school-age children in our programs.

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Programs and Services

The Children's Center. The Center provides care for 65 preschool children, two and a half through five years of age, and is open from 6:15 a.m. to 5:15 p.m.

Child Care Homes. These satellite homes were opened in Biddeford (1974), in Saco (1976), and on the campus of the University of New England (1977). The three homes enroll infants, toddlers, preschoolers and school-age children.

Project Welcome. This project integrates up to 20 young children with special needs and handicapping conditions into all programs of the St. Louis Child Care Services. Monies from the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped are used to support the enrollment of these children. This unusual program demonstrates the value of children sharing experiences with children mutually and equally, regardless of handicaps or developmental variations.

Kindergarten. The kindergarten is available to children enrolled with St. Louis Child Care Services. This class of 15 children is taught by a certified and experienced teacher and is approved by the State Department of Education.

Summer Program. Generally limited to families already enrolled with St. Louis Child Care Services this program provides a variety of activities, including swimming lessons, gymnastics and sports for 20 children in early elementary grades.

After School and Evening Shift Care. For children whose parents work the evening shift, care is provided at the Children's Center from 2:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. Participating children are three to eight years of age.

Support Services. A Family Support Program offers regular home visits, informal family activities, assistance in finding needed services and help in family emergencies.

Nutrition Program. This program provides family style meals and snacks prepared in our own kitchen.

Health Services. A nurse and a team of consulting specialists assist in planning for the individual needs of children.

The Enrollment of School-Age Children

Our first school-age child was referred to us by a ~~school~~ principal as a child who simply could not make it in kindergarten and who came from a family with many problems. She became part of our preschool child care center program. The following year she went to public kindergarten and we offered to keep her in the center before and after school. We helped her learn to bathe and dress for school, taught her how to walk to school alone, and greeted her warmly when she came back to the center for lunch in the afternoon. When she entered first grade she continued to spend the early mornings and afternoons with us. When she moved out of town toward the end of her first grade year, this little girl was functioning well within normal limits in the community and at school.

A legally blind boy, who was thought to be retarded, was also enrolled that first year. The program for blind children would not accept him because he was diagnosed as retarded, the retarded program would not enroll him because he was blind and the cerebral palsy program would not consider a multiply handicapped child. So he came to day care with us. His family had been told that he would never be able to do anything. As a result, it never occurred to them to let him try. At five years of age he had never fed himself or taken off his hat or mittens. He walked backwards. He quoted television commercials and the pledge of allegiance. No one had ever talked with him so he talked to himself. He had never played with toys or with other children near his age. We treated him like a much younger child at first. Very gradually he changed from a completely isolated individual to a child who was making a beginning toward enjoying himself and others. He spent two and a half years with us and was then enrolled in a public kindergarten. Since then he has gone to school at the center for blind children that originally refused to take him. He is still a very unusual child. His physical and vision problems will always be with him and he will never completely recover from the tragedy of being treated like a helpless infant for five years. We wish he and his family could have had help much earlier.

An eight year old girl came in with her foster mother one day during our second year of operation. This very unusual child had never spent more than a half hour in school. With a history of being severely abused she had been placed in foster care as an infant. The foster mother had been asked to keep her until she was old enough to be placed in a state institution for the retarded. At the time she came to us her emotional control was like that of a two year old. Whenever she was interrupted or asked to participate in routines she would explode in anger and distress. We made an absolute minimum number of demands on her. Very slowly she was able to accept the routines, transitions, and the limits of the child care day. Before she left us she was reading and writing, and she had put on a puppet show for the "Little Kids," complete with poster to announce the show, and had kept the children's attention while she presented it. She is now in public school spending some time each day in a resource room. She still struggles with emotional problems but everyone recognizes she is a very bright child.

Thus, our school-age child care really began with our willingness to adapt a preschool program to meet the needs of a few children with special problems. We continue to have school-age children enrolled in our preschool child care program. At present most of these children are referred to us by school districts. Under our mandatory education law in Maine, children who are five years old and up may attend a child care program if this is considered to be the preferable educational placement for the child, and if the program can provide a special education professional in the building. By following these guidelines, school districts can be reimbursed for the cost by the Department of Education. Our preschool child care program lends itself to the integration of older children who have special problems because children from two and a half through five years of age are together in family groupings and because we have an individualized approach, using both early childhood and Montessori philosophies in order to provide a developmental environment for children.

For several years, staff members' children who were in half-day kindergarten or in early elementary grades came to us before and after school and during school vacations and snow days. Sometimes they were regularly enrolled, and sometimes this was an informal arrangement. Other parents began to request school-age child care, especially for the half-day kindergarten child. In Biddeford a child spends a half year in the morning kindergarten and a half year in the afternoon kindergarten. Parents find it nearly impossible to find reasonable child care for the broken periods of the day, since many Biddeford parents begin work at 7:00 a.m. on the first shift in the mills and the children are not allowed on the school grounds until 8:00 a.m. A morning kindergarten class in our center, which allowed children to be enrolled for the full hours of our child care program, seemed to be a reasonable solution to these problems. The need for a smaller and more individualized kindergarten class for some children was another factor in our decision to offer a kindergarten program. Some children in our child care program were not ready for public kindergarten but could benefit from a smaller class. Some of these were children with handicaps. Every year we have had a waiting list for the kindergarten without extending our enrollment beyond our own children. A few spaces in our kindergarten are always reserved for children with special needs and handicapping conditions who may be referred by school districts in the fall.

At the end of our first kindergarten year it became obvious that parents expected that their children would remain in child care during the summer before they began first grade. In response to this we developed a summer program for our own kindergarten children and a few other children of early elementary age. (These additional children are either siblings of children presently enrolled or children who have been enrolled previously in our child care program.) The summer program includes gymnastics, swimming lessons and many field trips. It is essentially a day camp program with a home base in the kindergarten room of the Children's Center.

In 1976 we opened a child care home as a satellite to our day care center. The home was located in the personal residence of two board members whose children were a new-born infant and a child about to start first grade. We licensed their home in the name of St. Louis Child Care Services and hired a staff person. The use of their home was an inkind contribution to our program and the family paid fees for the enrollment of their own children. We enrolled another infant and several additional school-age children in this child care home, thus beginning another aspect of our school-age child care. Two older children in this program have been enrolled with St. Louis continuously since 1973. We feel that a combination of child care homes and a center program for infants, pre-schoolers, and school-age children provides not only unusual continuity and stability in child care for growing children, but also a variety of choices to meet the needs of children and families.

We are pleased that our extended family model has been recognized by a number of our children who have returned to us at ages ten to twelve as volunteers. This is yet another facet of school-age child care for us, as we provide supervision and guidance for these youngsters as they care for younger ones. It is also a good example of the natural way in which our program continues to grow.